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# Made up **NORTH**

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A collection of business leaders' reflections on wisdom for work



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Disclaimer: All interviews have been written based on audio recordings taken at Made Up North breakfast events run by Ministry2Business. Audio recordings have been adapted and edited for this publication, and some additional information has been included where this relates to topics covered in the talks.

These interviews have been undertaken with express permission from the speakers and external sources are referenced where appropriate.

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# Made up NORTH

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Made Up North was a series of informal breakfast gatherings that were held at the Albert Square Chop House in Manchester city centre between March 2015 and March 2020.

Organised by Ministry2Business and hosted by the Rev. Pete Horlock, minister to Manchester's business community, the events were an opportunity for business professionals from across the city centre to gather together over breakfast and hear from some of the city's senior business leaders.

Each was asked the question; "What piece of advice would you give your 25-year-old self?"

To date, Ministry2Business has hosted 32 breakfasts. Each speaker shared something of their work story and lessons learned along the way. This publication highlights just a few of those events, but every Made Up North gathering was memorable and encouraging.

Though some of the talks date back to 2015, the topics covered have never been more relevant to us today. In a world where uncertainty and change have always been the norm, taking the time to consider our mental health, resilience, priorities and values is more important now than ever.

## Foreword

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### How can we encourage people in their work?

It's one of the key questions that has driven Ministry2Business over the years.

The Made Up North breakfast event was the brilliantly simple idea of M2B founder Derrick Watson: a free, informal breakfast which brought together professionals from different sectors, which provided the opportunity to share encouragements and new perspectives that people could apply in their work. Armed with a great tasting breakfast and a good coffee, we listened to and learnt from the insights, anecdotes, values and honest wisdom of experienced business people.

One strong theme that stood out consistently was the positive impact people can have when they are generous with their time and resources. Indeed, one of the pleasures of working in Manchester's business community has been experiencing that generosity. Doing good to others - even when it's costly - is a principle shared both by people who have a religious faith and those who don't. Ministry2Business has a distinctly Christian foundation and some of our speakers share that faith while others don't. Interestingly, the breakfast provided a unique opportunity to explore the influence that faith has on our work and purpose in a very personal way which strengthened understanding and respect.

Thank you to Jen Potter for her work turning the audio recordings of each talk into written format, and to Dan Reeves for bringing it all together into this beautifully designed booklet. But above all I'm grateful to all the speakers who generously gave their time and effort to share their stories with us and make the breakfast events such a success. In particular I want to thank Vikas, Christine, Gharry, Joelle, Stewart and Shirley for being willing to let us edit and use their talks for this booklet.

I hope that in some way their stories will provide fresh insight and encouragement for your work too.

Enjoy,

*Pete Horlock*



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## Talking with... Vikas Shah MBE DL

Vikas Shah MBE DL is an entrepreneur, investor and philanthropist. He published his latest book, *Thought Economics: Conversations with the Remarkable People Shaping our Century* in February 2021.

Vikas spoke to us in July 2016 to share his personal mental health journey and how mindfulness has brought a new perspective to his work and personal life.

## How mindfulness can improve mental health

### The dot-com bubble

Vikas's story starts with extraordinary success at an early age.

When he was 14, Vikas taught himself to code and started building websites for clients. He timed his entry into the corporate world well; the dot-com bubble was booming and everyone wanted a website. His business saw incredibly fast-paced growth and two years later, aged only 16, he had offices in New York, Manchester, London and Sydney.

Not long after this, the dot-com bubble burst. At its peak in 2000, the stock market had experienced excessive speculation of Internet-related companies, and after a period of massive growth came the inevitable crash, deep and sudden. Many of Vikas' biggest clients ended their contract with the company, leading Vikas to sell off as many aspects of the business as he could.

Despite this, business life continued and he embraced what he calls the 'alpha male' culture of the office. He and his colleagues would compete with each other on everything: how early they got into work, how much they could drink after work, how close they could get to staying out all night whilst still managing to perform at work.

He was putting on a good show of being happy with his life, but under the surface he was far from it.

### The final warning

Things came to a head one night at 1am, stood on the edge of the roof of a multi-storey car park. He was ready to take his own life. This was his fourth attempt.

*"I really felt like this was the solution."*

But at just the right moment, he saw a sign for the Samaritans charity. They talked him down at about 4am, and he was back in the office at 8am. His colleagues were none the wiser.

This final warning prompted him to see a doctor and, for him, medication and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) have played a key role in helping him to heal mentally.

*"I've always tried to be reasonably healthy," Vikas shared. "As a nation we're proactive about our physical health. Why aren't we as proactive about the health of our minds?"*

Since then, Vikas has been proactive about looking after his mental health, in particular, through developing mental resilience.

### What is mental resilience?

Mental resilience is your capacity to adapt in the face of challenging circumstances, whilst maintaining a stable mental wellbeing. One of the ways to cultivate mental resilience is through practising mindfulness.

## Learning the art of mindfulness

A concept Vikas had previously avoided like the plague, mindfulness was, in fact, a revelation to him. Mindfulness is about becoming more aware of the present moment, and of our thoughts and feelings to help us understand ourselves better and enjoy life more.

*“I think mindfulness should be taught from an early age. It’s a really important life skill.”*

## Identifying what really matters

Vikas confessed that he used to identify first and foremost as the CEO of a global design business. When that collapsed he didn’t have a sense of identity anymore.

*“The moment you identify yourself as what you do for a living rather than who you are as a person, you set yourself up for failure.”*

The fascinating longitudinal study, Harvard Grant, followed participants from birth until death to answer the question: what makes a good life?

It found that

**“close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives.”**

And alongside our close relationships, what else really matters is finding something you love doing. For Vikas, that’s writing poetry and drawing. Allocating time to do the things that bring us joy may feel totally unproductive, but Vikas makes sure

he schedules them into his week. *“It’s really important we figure out what we really love doing and, once we figure it out, we’ve got to indulge it.”*

Take the example of Silicon Valley, California; the global centre of technology and innovation and home to all the high-tech big-hitters including Google, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft. It’s considered by many to be one of the most successful places in the world, and if it were its own nation it would be the fifth largest economy in the world.

It’s also the place where meetings either feature a walk in a park with a macchiato or a yoga class.

California’s approach to the work-life balance has brought success. They’re certainly doing something right. It turns out that when we prioritise the things that really matter above wealth and success, that can actually help us to achieve success in business anyway.

*“They’ve embraced what the Harvard Grant study and mindfulness show us”, Vikas reflected. “That if you are not a healthy person mentally and physically, you cannot be super successful.”*

## How can we boost mental wellbeing in the workplace?

Stress isn’t just an inevitable side effect of work. It’s life-threatening. Taking a leaf out of Google’s book might just help to boost employee happiness and mental resilience.

## 1. Trusting staff more

Google employees are given complete discretion about when they complete their work. If they want to stop working to have a massage or to even sleep, they can. In fact, all Google employees are allowed to spend 20% of their time (that’s one day a week) on any project they like. Releasing staff to follow their passions means a happier and more productive workforce, and Google can tap into the many talents of staff making it good for business too.

## 2. Treating staff well

Employee perks like free meals, haircuts and medical care show staff that their wellbeing is important and boost happiness.

## 3. Encouraging a culture of getting help

A workplace where it’s the norm to have a mentor, to speak openly about feelings and to seek professional help is essential.

Vikas’ parting thoughts to us were on the significance of building mental resilience.

*“As business leaders we are constantly making critical decisions with wide reaching impacts on hundreds of people. The mental load is enormous.”*

*“The thing I wish I’d learnt way sooner? The most important life skill to be successful is mental resilience. I see resilience as the bungee cord on a jump. Resilience stops you from hitting the ground.” ■*



“

The moment you identify yourself as what you do for a living rather than who you are as a person, you set yourself up for failure.

VIKAS SHAH

”



## Talking with... Christine Hewson

Christine Hewson is the north region chair of KPMG UK. Based in Manchester for over 13 years, she now lives in Saddleworth with her husband Pete, grown up children Lily and Tom, their beloved 13-year-old cocker spaniel Bobby and the latest addition to the Hewson clan: a 7-month-old mini dachshund Frankie. Christine started at KPMG straight out of university, and is still there 30 years later. It's safe to say, she quite likes it!

We fondly remember when Christine came to speak to us in December 2016. She shared a golden nugget she learned when reflecting back on her experience of working with one particular colleague.

## Learning the value of unearthing golden nuggets

### Can you tell us about a time in your working life that made a lasting impression on you?

My story begins about five or six years before I made partner, but I didn't really learn my lesson until many years later.

Our chairman, Alan Benzie, asked me to be his executive assistant for six months. And although it was a role on top of the day job, it was probably one of the best things I ever did.

### Why was it such a good experience?

Working with Alan was just great fun. He's an amazing business man, and a larger than life character: I vividly recall on one occasion him accidentally setting fire to his bin! He was incredibly well-connected across the city, and on the UK board. It was around that time that KPMG was selling its consultancy practice, and I learnt a lot. It was an exciting role.

In fact I did such a good job I couldn't get off it. I was doing it for about 18 months, until I became pregnant and left to go on maternity leave. Alan joked, *"What have you done that for? I had great plans for you. Make sure you come and see me when you come back."*

And when he rang me a few weeks after Tom's birth he reiterated, *"Don't forget to come and see me when you're back."*

### And did you see him when you returned?

No, I didn't. But some time later I did bump into him in the staff canteen. Again, with some persistence, he said, *"You need to come see me, so we can talk about what you're going to do next."*

I didn't go and see him.

Six months later I was asked if I would move to KPMG's Leeds office. I didn't really want to go: I had two pre-school aged children and our support network was in Manchester but I felt I couldn't say no. So, I moved to the Leeds office and commuted daily - sometimes a two-hour trip each way! At the time, Alan had asked me *"Are you sure?"* and I'd just replied, *"Yeah, yeah I'm fine."*

### How was Leeds?

My children were very young. I worked full-on, full-time for 15 months. The kids weren't sleeping and I wasn't listening to my body. I overworked myself and got ill, and had to go on sick leave for about five weeks. It was as if my body was saying, *"You're not listening, here, this will slow you down."*

Once I'd recovered I had Alan on the phone again, asking me what on earth I was doing. *"Let me go and speak to the head of tax, you need to come back to Manchester,"* he'd said. *"No, no, I'm fine",* I assured him, *"I'll sort it myself."*

And I did sort it myself. I moved back to Manchester and made partner, eventually becoming head of the tax division in the north of England.

### When did you next speak to Alan?

I saw him at a business dinner some time later. He congratulated me on making partner but said, *“You could have got there much earlier. Why didn’t you let me help?”* And I just politely told him that I didn’t need his help.

### Why has this encounter stuck with you?

It’s only recently, when training to be a partner counsellor within the firm, that I’ve come to a realisation about the way Alan took the time to look out for me.

At the end of a recent peer-to-peer meeting, a colleague remarked: *“These sessions are so useful, Christine. I always go away with at least one golden nugget, and we’ve just unearthed another one. Thank you so much for your time.”*

It made me feel good that I’d been able to help him in some way. But it also made me think about Alan and all those times he’d reached his hand out and said *“let me help you.”*

I wondered, what would it have meant to him if I’d let him help me? But equally what would it have meant for me?

I was 37 years old when I made partner. The first female partner in Manchester. I’ve since made it my aim to make it easier for others to get there. Maybe if I’d got there a bit earlier I might have

been able to help others get there sooner too. Maybe it would have been better for my family.

How many golden nuggets did I miss out on by not accepting his help and advice?

Getting to where I’ve got to in my career has been a bit like climbing a mountain. When you get to the top it’s absolutely exhilarating. But I could have climbed that mountain with a guide. And instead I chose to do it on my own.

### What advice would you give to people at the start of their career?

One of the things our peer-to-peer counsellor training taught us to do is to look at ourselves deeply. And I found some things about myself that I didn’t really like that much. Some of my strengths are weaknesses at the same time. At KPMG we refer to this as our ‘Be-strong’ driver. I’m great in a crisis: I go in and I get stuff done. But I’m terrible at saying *“will you help me?”*

By all means be a guide for others. But remember, there is strength in taking help and indeed asking for it. It’s not a weakness. If you get the opportunity to learn from others, like I was offered, then take it.

If Manchester’s business community could do one thing better it would be to collaborate more with each other. Great leaders reach out. They do ask for help.

And when I look back on my 25-year-old self and ask what do I wish I’d done differently? Then that’s it. ■

“

Needing help -  
asking for help  
- is an essential  
part of being a  
leader.

PETER BREGMAN

”



## Talking with... Gharry Eccles

Gharry Eccles is the VP of UK & Oceania Cereal Partners Worldwide, the joint venture between Nestlé & General Mills. Originally from Stockport, he's made Harpenden his home since 2016. His British Guianan parents emigrated to the UK in 1965, the year before he was born, and he was adopted by a British couple when he was three years old.

Over his career, he's worked in leadership roles at big names including Nestlé, Wrigley, Müller and PZ Cussons. Reflecting on his career so far, Gharry spoke to Made Up North in June 2015 sharing 10 things he wishes he could have told his 25-year-old self when he was starting out.

## 10 things I wish I'd known sooner

### Your values matter

It's tempting to think that success is all about the 'what': defining your goals and strategies and delivering the numbers in your plan. But as you develop as a leader, you realise that 'how' you do things - ie your values - matters more than you think.

Accountability? Integrity? Resilience? Respect? Reflecting on his upbringing, Gharry recognises that a lot of his values come from his parents.

When Gharry conducts job interviews, people rarely ask him about the job description - they ask him about his company values and their impact on the wider world.

*"So, when leading your team, think about what your values are. How can you articulate them clearly, and are they authentic and visible?"*

### Know what you're good at and stick to it

Those that achieve fame and success don't get there by focusing on their deficits, but by focusing on their passions and strengths.

*"I know what the right questions are to ask, but I don't need to be an expert. What I do need to know is what I'm really good at and where I can make a real impact."*

If he'd known that when he was starting out, Gharry could have saved himself a lot of time and self-inflicted pressure

trying to learn everything about everything.

### It's the people that make the difference

*"It's not about getting the right thinking and the right strategy, and then telling people what to do. It's about getting the right people on the bus."*

Gharry confessed how, at times, it felt frustrating working with someone who seemed to be stuck on the details when he wanted to think BIG. But he realised that that's exactly who he needed.

*"I'm a shaper, an initiator - so what I actually needed was someone who's a completer, a finisher."*

Finding people with complementary skills who are able to help you deliver the change you want will set you up for success as a leader.

### Make time to find a mentor

Ask for feedback regularly and find a mentor in the business. Someone you trust who will hold you accountable.

Throughout his life, role models have had a big influence on Gharry.

He fondly remembers his headmaster, who coached and mentored him following a serious car accident. And he describes one of the best bosses he's had as intelligent, courageous and passionate. Another personal mentor in his life was Bill Wrigley Jr.

*“He modelled the behaviour he wanted to see, and he asked the tough questions.”*

At M2B, we couldn't agree more. Being mentored is one of the key ways in which we can each grow – not only in our role in business, but as a person outside of work.

Gharry has now cultivated his own personal board of advisors. Two or three trusted friends who he knows will tell things to him straight.

### **Build a diverse team and coach them**

Diversity - in skills, background, perspectives - brings many benefits. It makes people better at problem solving, it boosts your talent pipeline and it allows people to fully be themselves at work.

*“And be sure to coach them. Find a way to build up the people in your team. Knowledge is the only thing you can give away and still be rich. Probably richer.”*

### **Be proactive and take some risks**

When things don't turn out how you planned, embrace it. Be proactive.

After stepping away from a job at Müller, Gharry spent a year following his dreams – and saw fantastic opportunities arise from it.

*“When you take risks, you learn a lot. If you've got dreams, do it.”*

### **Mistakes happen. Learn and move on**

Gharry recalled an advertising campaign for Wrigley that fell flat and brought the firm the wrong sort of attention.

*“Afterwards, when I spoke with Bill I recounted what I'd learnt from what happened. Bill said ‘Great, we won't talk about it again.’”*

What a response!

Mistakes happen to us all. So be reassured – you can recover from them, but you need to learn the lessons and move on. A good leader knows the value of learning from mistakes, talking about it and allowing their colleagues to learn and move on too.

### **Make time to nurture your vision**

And that's both professionally and personally.

*“Know where you're going. As a business, yes, but also where you're going in life. What's your vision for your family, for your whole life?”*

Take time to consider how you are nurturing all your roles in life. Not just as a business leader, but as a parent, a spouse, a child, a sibling.

### **Be competitive - but focus on the right thing**

*“When I was at Kimberly-Clark, we were told to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, ‘How am I going to beat our competitor Procter & Gamble?’*

*“The P&G guy was smarter. He said, ‘Look in the mirror and ask yourself, how am I going to meet consumer needs better?’”*

Leaders are naturally competitive. But keep your focus on your customer, not your competitor.

### **Look after yourself**

Look after your...

- **Mind**  
Keep learning. Stay curious and inspired.
- **Body**  
Stay healthy. Eat well, exercise and sleep! Corporate life is a marathon, not a sprint.
- **Soul**  
Nurture your spiritual core.

Gharry's faith helps him find a deeper purpose in his work and keeps him going through difficult times.

*“I believe in a God who creates and works. I don't just work for my shareholders, I'm accountable to God. Ultimately, having God at the centre, actually then, is a filter for everything else.” ■*



“

It's not about getting the right strategy and then telling people what to do.

It's about getting the right people on the bus.

GHARRY ECCLES

”



## Talking with... Joëlle Warren MBE DL

Joëlle is a busy woman. Executive Chair and founding partner of Warren Partners, Vice Lieutenant of Cheshire, founding chair of the Cheshire Community Foundation and church leader. Oh, and most importantly, a mother and wife.

Happily, she found the time to speak to us in November 2015.

Joëlle doesn't consider herself to be an entrepreneur, and doesn't fit the typical entrepreneurial persona of dropping out of school to set up a business (that's more Richard Branson's style). Brought up to believe that working hard and playing by the rules was the way to go places, she was a 'good girl' who studied hard.

Perhaps the one thing that set her apart from her peers was that at the age of 14 she decided to go church. *"Some of my family still think I'm a little bit bonkers in that respect."*

## Work hard at staying true to yourself

### Is hard work always recognised?

For the first 10 years of her career, Joëlle progressed steadily through retail and corporate banking life. She worked hard and felt valued and invested in.

After having children and moving back to Cheshire, she became the most senior woman to work at Lloyds Bank outside of London - at the age of 30.

### What does she think about female representation in the boardroom?

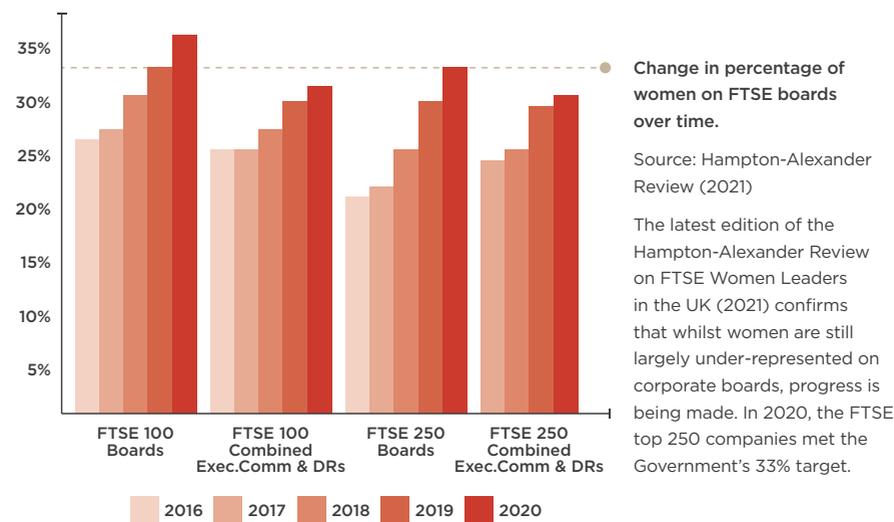
*"People think we need boardroom diversity for diversity's sake," she recalled. "But it's actually good for business. Whenever there's more than*

*two women on a board - 30% seems to be the critical number - the dynamic, tone and breadth of discussion and debate is better. And more effective."*

Whilst her children were young she wanted to continue working part-time. However, despite working hard for Lloyds, when she requested a job share position the bank wasn't interested.

So she moved to the head-hunting firm her father had founded as maternity cover for their finance director. She confessed, *"I didn't realise that banking and accountancy were slightly different qualifications! So I was in a bit of a twist. I did get us to year end, but it was a real fluke."*

Women leaders in FTSE companies - change in the UK over time



## Another hurdle

One thing led to another and she ended up staying with the firm in a recruiting role within the banking sector. Another new experience, but a very good fit. However, when the firm invited her to become an equity partner they said it was on the basis that she went full-time and used her maiden name (Howgate). The trouble was, Howgate was not the name she'd been using professionally and she had no plans to work full-time while her boys were pre-school age.

## A lightbulb moment

With a lot to think about, and before she'd responded to the offer, she found herself in a situation with a colleague which gave her clarity. When running late for a meeting, he, feeling the pressure, spoke rudely to a receptionist.

*"I was so excruciatingly embarrassed by the way he treated her that I decided I wouldn't join them as an equity partner."*

It might sound a bit extreme, but it was an indication to her of something fundamental: that their values and hers were not aligned.

It was a lightbulb moment and one which has shaped her career ever since.

Joëlle left to set up Warren Partners; a recruitment firm which did align with her values, in particular, her 'golden rule' to:

**Treat others as you want to be treated**

*Jesus Christ*

## Four lessons to stay true to yourself

So here are Joëlle's top four lessons she's learnt - or, she admits, relearns again and again. They're what's proved to be most important to her throughout her career.

### Lesson One: Stick to your core values

Joëlle's values have come from her Christian background, but the challenge was how to articulate them in the business world. *"Recruitment isn't an industry that's trumpeted for its moral values,"* she reflected. *"When I set up Warren Partners, I wanted it to centre around my golden rule and disseminate into every area of the business."*

The vision was that that receptionist would never be treated like that. And any candidate that's ever been told a lie, would never be treated like that. And that client who's been told you'll deliver on this date - and then you don't - would never be treated like that.

And in the first week of the new job, she landed a huge gig with Virgin Money. It turned out that clients loved the values, and candidates loved the values. *"Quickly,"* she recalled, *"we became too busy and even had people contacting us asking to work with us."*

Joëlle happily credits God as the one who blessed her business. At M2B we believe that God loves to provide. And we love seeing him at work, through our work.

### Lesson Two: If you're faithful in little things, you'll be faithful in larger things

This principle has guided Joëlle throughout her career. No matter what level of responsibility she had been given, she's always been - in her words - pedantic about being faithful in the little things.

At the age of 27, she was already managing a portfolio of banking clients and a branch with 40 people working for her. Yet it was important to her, perhaps even because of her significant responsibilities, to be honest and faithful about the little things.

One occasion, colleagues were shocked when she insisted on paying for some paper clips from the office cupboard she needed for a Sunday School activity. And whenever she used the office franking machine for a personal letter, she'd reimburse the office kitty.

*"I felt it was really important to be faithful in those little things. Then you will be entrusted with big things."*

### Lesson Three: Don't form self-limiting beliefs based on what other people say about you

Her boss once told her that she wasn't a natural salesperson. She believed it and it held her back.

*"Ironically, that's what I'm best known for now. People come to me for sales advice. It's what I do: day in, day out."*

What can we learn from this?

1. Be careful about the feedback you give others; and

2. Carefully weigh up the feedback that you're given. Don't let it hold you back.

Maybe she didn't fit the mould of a typical salesperson, but selling turned out to be one of her biggest strengths. Trust your instincts and believe in yourself.

**If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities.**

*Jesus Christ*

### Lesson Four: It's alright to say "no"

*"I am a bit of a people pleaser and tend to say yes to everything. But what I'm learning to do is say, 'Thank you for asking me, can I come back to you?'"*

That is very much a work in progress for Joëlle. But she doesn't feel that she takes on all the burdens herself.

*"I share them. With God, with my husband, with my friends. Everything is done in the context of the relationship I have with God. Over time, I've come to trust my gut a lot more. It's informed by my experiences, by the counsel I've had through the years, by how God has guided me in the past. He doesn't change." ■*



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Don't form  
self-limiting beliefs  
based on what  
other people say  
about you.

JOËLLE WARREN

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## Talking with... Stewart McCombe

Stewart McCombe spent over 20 years working in the banking sector, for Bank of Scotland, until he refocused his working life on the not-for-profit sector. He's an operating partner with gunnercooke, where he supports charities and social businesses focus on commercial viability to maintain financial sustainability, as well as helping commercial businesses to see values beyond financial profit.

Stewart spoke to Made Up North in February 2019 where he shared that music is his absolute passion. He learnt a lot about business from playing in bands: leadership (from the conductor), time management (by turning up on time) and delighting the customer (or, in that case, the audience).

*"Music gave me the chance to see more of the world than my career ever has. And it's always around me, whether it's in the background when I'm working or if I'm reaching for a particular lyric to inspire."*

## Music, memories and musings on life

### What does it mean to 'be the best'?

Society too often applies a binary - and often financial - view on success. But Stewart urged us to challenge the status-quo and consider what it means to be the best you can be, rather than to 'be the best'. He shared how he found an answer to this question through the lens of two particular days in his life.

#### 15 May 1987: first pay-day

Stewart was offered a job with Bank of Scotland as a teenager, after taking part in a Young Enterprise programme which challenged young people to run their own company for a year.

*"I left school on the Friday, started work on the Monday, and haven't looked back since."*

His first pay-day meant visiting his favourite record store and fuelling his passion for music.

*"£4.49 of my first ever pay cheque went on Deacon Blue's debut album, Raintown."*

There's a man I meet,  
walks up our street

He's a worker for the council,  
has been twenty years

And he takes no lip off nobody,  
and litter off the gutter

Puts it in a bag, and never  
thinks to mutter

The words of the song Dignity, struck a chord with him. A street sweeper striving to be the best he could be whilst at the same moment, organisations on the top floors of buildings across Glasgow were being pitted against each other to be the best.

*"Bankers against bankers. The culture was about aiming to be no.1, rather than doing the best you can, and measurement was through a financial lens only."*

#### 3 September 2007: an epiphany

*"This was the day I was told my son had a brain tumour. And when visiting him in hospital I discovered that Manchester was not the best it could be."*

Stewart was struck by Manchester's social inequalities when he saw that some children in the hospital ward didn't have families with them. He had an epiphany that changed the course of his career. *"Everything I've done in my career since then has been for a 12-year-old boy I met in that ward who had empty chairs by his bed."*

### Risk assessment

Being a banker meant Stewart often had to assess risk. But his son's illness gave him a new perspective on risk.

*"All of the risk assessments I'd done up to that point had been desk-based and behind a screen. Now I was signing forms associated with my son's brain*

*surgery. It made me understand a whole new level of risk.”*

At that moment, Stewart decided he would leave banking, and did so two years later in 2009. Embracing the new perspective his son’s illness had given him, he transferred his skills in securing financial return on investment into focusing on social return on investment. All the while thinking about that 12-year-old boy.

### **A new kind of richness**

For Stewart, the last 12 years have been full of opportunity, curiosity, and richness.

*“We all need money to live, but applying richness and success purely to a financial analysis surely leaves the equation unfinished.”*

Stewart’s new career path brings him a new kind of richness. For him, that richness comes when you remember to value the people you meet, and embrace wider opportunities.

*“I’ve started to say yes to experiences that I would have missed out on if I’d stayed on the path to the summit of the banking world.”*

### **Challenges for us all**

Stewart’s vision is that businesses will see that real corporate social responsibility is actually good for a business commercially. And that seeing things differently does actually make a difference.

His parting thoughts for us were three challenges:

### **1. Look directly at what makes you uncomfortable.**

If you see that something isn’t right, don’t walk on by.

*“Sitting next to a homeless individual on the street, all you see are legs rushing past. But in the pursuit of what? A simple hello can make a big difference as you rush on by.”*

Stewart once spent a day with Common Purpose visiting prisoners in HMP Manchester. Walking back through the city later that evening, he experienced the overwhelming burden of his own freedom.

*“Looking around and seeing the world from different perspectives really helps us to understand, and to think about the long-term solutions.”*

### **2. Have contrast in your lives**

Take on a role as a board member, governor or trustee for a charity.

*“You’ll learn about yourself, apply your business skills in a fresh way that will boost your career, and will bring new perspectives to your primary role.”*

### **3. Choose your discomfort**

*“Would you rather feel uncomfortable pushing for better, or feel uncomfortable settling for less?”*

Push yourself into the discomfort of being the best version of yourself. Look for opportunities to make a difference where you are - not just to be ‘the best’ but to be the best version of yourself. ■

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We all need money to live, but applying richness and success purely to a financial analysis surely leaves the equation unfinished.

STEWART MCCOMBE

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## Talking with... Dr Shirley Jenner

Dr Shirley Jenner is a senior lecturer in Human Resource Management at the University of Manchester and finds her happy place in helping people make good career decisions. To that end, she's also a professional development coach and Myers-Briggs practitioner. Let's face it, she's probably someone we could have all done with knowing when we were expected to make major career decisions at the age of 16!

Shirley is no stranger to feeling disillusioned about her job. After leaving university she worked at Manchester City Council as a planning officer but three years into the job she realised it was not a good fit for her.

When Shirley gave this talk on resilience in September 2015 the language of a global pandemic, government-enforced lockdowns, hospitals at breaking point and daily death toll reports were the domain of disaster films. Among other things, the Covid-19 pandemic has illustrated the vital importance of growing in personal resilience. Where we've witnessed this resilience, whether in the enduring service of frontline workers or the caring generosity of neighbours, it gives hope even in dark times.

## What is resilience and how can it help us in the workplace?

### What is resilience?

Over recent years businesses have moved from being rigid and bureaucratic to being lean, flatter and adaptive. But that's not enough anymore. Businesses now also have to be resilient. Indeed, with forced closures and limits on movement and activities, the Covid-19 pandemic has been the ultimate test of business resilience.

For some, resilience might conjure up images of a hard outer shell or toughening up. Actually, as Shirley explained, *"it's about being able to adapt and have the elasticity to cope with difficult circumstances."*

In a business context, resilience is defined as:

**"the ability of an organisation to quickly adapt to disruptions while maintaining continuous operations."**

The concept originated from risk management: businesses needed to recognise and prepare for inevitable problems, such as IT systems failures or economic downturns. Much like a building in an earthquake zone, businesses aim to have the elasticity to recover quickly from shockwaves and stay standing.

On a personal level, disappointing results in an exam, an unexpected

illness in the family or a career not being what you'd hoped for are the sorts of disappointments that come along for us all. Yet too often we're taught that the best way to deal with disruptions is to toughen up and carry on regardless.

*"With the right perspective, though, we can use these experiences as opportunities to grow in personal resilience which helps us to better cope next time - inside and outside the workplace."*

### Why do we need it?

The *Harvard Business Review* has said that

**"surprises are the new normal. The difference between winners and losers is how they handle losing."**

What wise words!

Sometimes unexpected change happens suddenly like job cuts or changes to workload pressures and expectations. Other times it's about dealing with a long-term problem or dissatisfaction like a personality clash. Whatever form it takes, none of us will successfully avoid hardships. The difference, HBR highlights, is not only being able to bounce back from setbacks, but learning from them.

In her book *Resilience: A Practical Guide for Coaches*, Carole Pemberton

reminds us that personal resilience not only helps us to deal with situations but enables us to become stronger, wiser and more able. Hardships are actually an opportunity to grow in these three important areas.

Shirley added, *“If I can be so bold as to adapt Eleanor Roosevelt’s famous quote: You only know how strong a tea bag is when you put it in hot water.”*

### How do we develop resilience to become stronger, wiser and more able?

When we’re faced with disruptions or change, we need to engage with what’s really happening, rather than sanitising difficulty and pretending everything is OK. It is a process of learning and, like the tea bag, it’s only in those difficult moments that we get the opportunity to learn this skill.

### Shirley’s moment of truth

Shirley studied to be a town planner with ambitions to serve communities and create better environments for people to live in. But within a few weeks of starting her job she felt disillusioned.

*“I was faced with a question,” she recalled. “Should I stick with it or confront the fact that it wasn’t what I wanted to do?”*

She persevered with it for three years. Eventually, though, she realised she was accommodating the job and, like a chameleon, was changing to fit her environment. She was beginning to lose sight of her own skills, passions and

hopes. Her dogged perseverance was NOT resilience. She was beginning to sink.

### The Stockdale Paradox

Shirley needed to confront the brutal fact that her current situation was not OK, and that change was needed in her career.

The *Stockdale Paradox* is a concept popularised by author Jim Collins stating that productive change arises out of adversity when we hold two apparently conflicting ideas in tension our minds:

#### 1. Confront the brutal facts

First, one must accept the brutal facts of reality. Too often we try to hold onto what is familiar or hide the difficult bits, but part of resilience is acknowledging that “this is really happening and it’s not great”. By accepting what’s really going on and that something needs to change we can deal with it.

#### 2. Hold on to hope

Secondly, one must maintain an unwavering faith in the endgame. It’s not blind optimism, but a realistic positivity. It’s trusting that something positive will come from it.

When Shirley confronted her situation and decided she needed an exit strategy, she chose an attitude of realistic positivity, and asked herself three questions.

### Three important questions to ask yourself

#### 1. Who am I?

It’s important to remember your significance is not defined by your work.

For Shirley, her Christian faith teaches her that she is significant not because of her accomplishments but because of who she is in God’s eyes - a child of God.

For others, it may be another faith or some other external source or grounding.

*“Whatever it is, it’s important not to pin all our sense of worth on our job. We must have faith that we have inherent significance and value.”*

#### 2. Where am I going?

This is about remembering your sense of purpose and direction instead of drifting along. What are your unique skills and passions and how can you use them best?

For Shirley, it was the idea of social justice, making a difference to a community and using her gifts to serve others.

Whatever our world view, many of us accept that we each have a place in society where we can thrive.

*“We must hold on to the hope, or realistic optimism, that we will be able to find a creative solution to our current disruption.”*

#### 3. How will I get there?

Taking the steps needed to change your situation isn’t easy so it’s important to take someone along with you. Find a supportive community to provide you with resources for the journey. Fellow travellers can help you overcome roadblocks, share difficulties and sorrows and help restore perspective.

We all need love, in the form of a supportive community, to remind us to keep going.

**Two are better than one. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up.**

*The Bible*

Asking yourself these three questions in moments of disruption will help build your resilience to become stronger, wiser and more able to cope with future difficulties.

### Step out into resilience

Moving out of her first profession was costly and difficult, and required Shirley to step out of her comfort zone rather than stick with what she knew.

But in doing so, she found an opportunity to grow in resilience by confronting her reality and making steps to change her situation.

She’s glad she did. It helped her to discover a new career that fits with her passions and skills, where she can help others find the right career path and grow in resilience themselves. ■

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Resilience is the capacity to remain flexible when faced by a life disruption so that we emerge from difficulty stronger, wiser and more able.

CAROLE PEMBERTON

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